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AUTHOR Issacs, Emily
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ABSTRACT

In process-oriented composition studies, few concepts are more universally accepted than that of the decentered classroom. Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow and Don Murray, in their publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s, began a movement to place students, with their writing and their ideas, at the center of writing instruction. While most teachers share the aims of centering attention on the students, questions about translating these aims into practice remain. What roles are available to the teacher of a student-centered writing class? A doctoral research project explored this question by observing three women writing teachers' pedagogies. While one teacher takes on a sideline position in her classroom and thus fits the traditional model of a teacher of a decentered classroom, the other two teachers, despite goals similar to the first teacher, take on more directive, active, and "talkative" roles. These two teachers have had to struggle to accept their directive, active styles. While one spent years forcing herself to teach from the sidelines, the other continues to express some misgivings about her role, worrying that her classroom is not student centered because she is so directive and talkative. These differences, however, might not be indicative of a rejection of process theory and the goals of a student-centered approach. Rather, these approaches can be seen as logical extensions of the teachers' personalities and identities and their reflections on student needs. (TB)

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Emily Isaacs
Writing Program
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Examining Assumptions about the Decentered Classroom

(Paper delivered at Conference on College Composition, Milwaukee, WI, March 1996)

In process-oriented composition studies, few concepts are more universally accepted than that of the decentered classroom. Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow and Don Murray, in their publications of the late sixties and early seventies, began a movement to place students, their writing and their ideas, at the center of writing instruction. Through time and repetition, notions of the decentered classroom have maintained almost unquestioned approval within our community; further, these notions have taken on a reified and static quality as they became abstracted into a general mandate—*take yourself out of the center of the class*—and removed from the contexts of our classrooms, and also of our own individual teaching situations and personal identities. In the years that I have particpated in writing conferences like this one and from my experience at UMass's Writing program, I have always heard—or, it *seems* like always anyway,— that good writing teachers are workshop teachers: teachers who somehow have classes filled with writing, revising, and self-motivated writers, while all along the teacher, apparently, has sat on the sidelines, smiling and silent, somehow emanating some kind of a powerful psychic presence which fosters writing growth.

While most teachers share the aims of centering attention on students, questions about translating these aims into practice remain: What roles are available to the teacher of a studentr-centered writing class? I will use data from my doctoral research on three women writing teachers' pedagogies to explore this question. By presenting three different examples of teachers' efforts to center attention on students and their writing, I aim to provide evidence of the range of enactments which decentered theory ought to accommodate. My goal is not to join the attack against the decentered classroom and the process writing legacy (Giroux, Hayes, Jarratt), but rather, following Patricia Bizzel and Lisa Delpit, use examination and discussion of practice, to open up the possibilities for teachers to define and negotiate their own personally consistent role in a decentered classroom. I think my topic is relevant now, some twenty-five years after notions of the decentered teacher were introduced, because, ironically, what once was so liberatory can

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now be experienced by teachers—whose classrooms and personal identities may not match those of the original proponents of the decentered classroom—as prescriptive and constricting. Thus, in some ways, for some teachers, the mandate for a decentered classroom, presented without contextualization and discussion, can present a boundary which needs transcending.

A brief gloss of my research will be illustrative. While one teacher literally takes on a sideline position in her classroom and thus fits into our traditional model of a teacher of a decentered classroom, the other two teachers, despite quite similar goals, take on much more directive, active, and literally talkative roles. These two teachers have had to struggle to accept their directive, active styles; while one spent years forcing herself to teach from the sidelines, the other continues to express some misgivings about her role, worrying that her class is not student centered because she is so directive and talkative. From my vantage point of viewing each pedagogy in full context, I do not see these differences as indicative of a rejection of process theory and teh goals of the student-centered approach, but rather I understand these teachers' chosen behaviors as logical extensions of their personalities and identities as well as reflections of their perceptions of what their students' need from them as teachers in order to make it possible for them to "center" themselves on improving their own writing.

Sabine: The 'decentered' Teacher

Walking into Sabine's classroom, a stranger might easily be unsure of who the teacher actually is. As you enter the computer classroom—a large room with carpeted floor, big windows, clean white walls, upholstered swivel chairs—you see three workstations containing six computer terminals and another smaller workstation of two computers, on the side and near the printer. If you were drawn to sound, you would be drawn to a group of students—perhaps Dave explaining the essay topic to Chris, or Holly and Monty discussing just about anything from the readings or the essays they are working on, to tales of their own dorm life adventures. Many students would be silent: Rosa typing with concentration, Leidy smiling to herself, looking to catch someone's eye. Kevin might be offering to read, or already reading, another student's essay. On another day, students might be involved in Interchange—an asynchronous on-line discussion computer program—writing and reading about their own writing, the assigned readings, and, depending on how you view social writing, practicing writing through social exchange, or socializing through writing.

After studying the twenty people in the room for a few moments, you might recognize Sabine as the teacher by the specks of gray which cover her shortly cropped hair. At thirty-two years of age, her graying hair is the only easy identifier of the some fourteen years she has on her students, to say nothing of her status as teacher. Very slight and casually dressed, Sabine blends in with her younger studentsWith rare exceptions, Sabine is nowhere near the physical or auditory center. Rather, Sabine can be found in one of two inconspicuous places: either talking in a low voice with a student at the student's individual terminal, or positioned on the side, using her computer to respond to essays or to participate in one of the interactive writing programs which are integral to her curriculum. Sabine's physical placement is important to underline as it reflects the role she strives to have in the classroom: in her words, to have "one-on-one" contact with students, to "leave them alone" or to function as a "participant in interactive activities like Interchange." (SG 1: 255-257).

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What I saw in Sabine's classroom is about as close as you can get to a teacher de-centered classroom writing workshop. The constant writing workshop in Sabine's classroom allowed students to have a good deal of individual choice about how to use their time, how much work to do with peers, and how much energy to spend on writing. Students had to attend class, turn in their work and participate in the many Interchange discussions which were held during class time. However, the bulk of class time was unstructured. On most days Sabine checked in with each student, with some for just a moment before she was sent on her way, with others, occasionally for as long as twenty minutes. Students were free to choose when to work independently on their writing or reading, and when to consult with peers or Sabine. Thus, DOn Murray's workshop of students talking about, reading, and responding to each other's texts is modified to a much more openly defined time. What is centrally similar in Sabine's pedagogy to Murray's workshop or Elbow's class discussions and course goals,[1], is the extent to which students were required to be the center and agent of their own learning as well as writing. Sabine's decision to limit her role in the classroom to that of facilitator, participant, and interested reader effectively worked to undermine the authoritative role which students are socialized to expect of teachers, and to which Sabine was personally and ideologically opposed. Notably, Murray's writing about the value of workshops and a non-directive approach to conferencing ("The Listening Eye") reflects his similar aims to diminish the authority of the teacher:

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[1]I am thinking particularly of his description of his 1971 article, "Exploring My Teaching"

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> Workshop is also important because it begins to diminish the role of the teacher. The student writer can become dangerously dependent on a response from a teacher. The student can learn to appeal to that one reader and to satisfy that one reader. That's too easy. The student needs to learn to appeal to many individual readers and to handle their contradictory responses. This process forces the student to turn back and decide, individually, what needs to be done to the text. (*A Writer Teaches* 189-190).

For Sabine, her decision to sidestep or ignore opportunities to assert her authority went beyond writerly goals. Sabine wanted to teach her students a broader lesson: to learn to "learn for their *own* good....to...wean them from the authority that I represent and do their work on their own, by their own motivation..." (1: 292-298).

Murray's advice to teachers, and to writers, is about individuals' power to re-write themselves—as long as teachers step out of the way and allow this to happen. If we do keep our distance, he promises, students can become and will become their own best critics: "if we create a way for our students to write with a minimum of prior instruction (our instruction often causes bad writing no matter how well-intentioned it is) we may find ways to help our students to respond to and improve their own drafts...so they will become effective readers and writers of their own prose" (*A Writer Teaches* xiii). Murray's belief in the power of the individual and the teacher's need to, in his words, "shut up" are clearly revealed in his anthologized essay, "The Listening Eye." In this well-known first-person account of and reflection on his student-teacher conferences Murray portrays himself as a middle-aged, avuncular and friendly person whose main function is not to talk, but to provide students with a kindly listener. The real work, prompted in part by student's preparations for conference, is done by students, working alone with their writing.[2] Murray's quintessential "de-centered" teaching is the result, he explains, of a slow progression away from the teacher-centered teaching he used to do when he stood up in the classroom, behind a lectern: "Each year I teach less and less, and my students seem to learn more and more. I guess what I've learned to do is stay out of their way and not to interfere with their learning" ("Eye" 233).

Phoebe's and Marcia's classrooms and teacher roles are radically different from Sabine's, or the apparently minimal role which Murray appears to play in his classroom.

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[2] For a discussion of the gender-specific nature of the belief in the solitary writer, see Brodkey's "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing."

When Phoebe walked into Bartlett 105 on January 27, 1994 many of her students had already arrived and were sitting quietly, waiting for something to happen. What happened was Phoebe started talking, quickly and immediately. "What's going on?" she asked nobody in particular as she made her way to the front of the classroom, smiling and making self-depreciating jokes. Moving to the front of the room, attention now on her, Phoebe urged students away from their computers and into the small space in front near her: "Okay everybody, why don't you just cruise on over here." Unlike Sabine and Marcia, typically Phoebe started each class by moving students away from the enticing computers and into a somewhat crowded but more traditional workshop writing classroom set up of a circle.

After some joking with individuals, Phoebe began:"The lab is going to be your second home, there's that much homework, so much homework. The lab is open all the time. By the time you leave here your writing is going to be one thousand times better... expect to spend all your social time in here... your homework starts today... It's kind of a fun place to be, you'll meet a lot of fun people." Phoebe continued on in this chatty vein, talking rapidly as she stated how useful the class was going to be and how they would learn a great deal. She emphasized that they would learn from each other and that in fact they would have to rely on each other for help.

Phoebe's introductory class was full of energy, initially emanating primarily from her, though soon some students also got involved, asking questions and making jokes/comments. On this first day she talked almost constantly, establishing rapport and introducing the course. She mentioned a lot about herself—that she was a knitter, that she loves ice skating at the new University skating rink, that she 'partied" her whole freshmen year and had a great time but got pretty bad grades, and that the smartest purchase she made her first year of college was a dictionary. Forty-five minutes into the period Phoebe hands out the first unit reading and instructs them to get started reading, being careful to underline and take notes. "I am a nightmare. I'm going to be look for [underlining, note taking]. I'm a good reader and I underline and take notes all the time... I'm like your second mother... You know, you thought you left your mother at home?" she laughed. "I'm going to check everything you do."

Soon, Phoebe has students back to the computers, logged on, and opened to the first writing assignment. As students worked individually, Phoebe darts around the room, reading over students' shoulders and voicing encouragement and opinion: "good answer," "that's good," "you're doing great," "keep going on that; I need to know what you

mean." When a student asks her a computer question she immediately re-directs the question to another student who has demonstrated some computer experience: "Well, why don't you ask this guy over here?" Besides illustrating what she has already announced—that she will not help them with computers—in this action Phoebe also began what came to be a consistent theme in her classroom: pushing students to rely on each other, to go to each other, and not to her. As she explained to me, her pedagogy is deliberately student-centered in that she works to get "them to be responsible for their own material and peer editing... I don't want to be coming around and telling them the answers to things. I want them to find the answers and give each other the answers." (PJ 1: 314-318).

I asked Heather, a student of Phoebe's, to describe Phoebe's teaching:

> She gets us all together in the beginning, for the first hour or so and then she lets us go on her own and I think she stands back then, unless she thinks you're having trouble. All the time you see her go up and get on people's back, you know, "Get this done," or, 'Do you need help?" At the same time, if she leaves you alone, she is there if you need her to ask questions, so I think she varies between students.

The first half of Phoebe's two hour class was spent with students gathered around Phoebe, responding to the many questions she hurled at them. Often this time was devoted to examining and analyzing students' essays; Phoebe talked a lot then, encouraging and pushing her students to articulate the strong and weak points of the essay, and then repeating and re-emphasizing the ideas they had just articulated. In the second hour, students usually worked alone or in small groups and Phoebe marched amongst them, reading over their shoulder, interrogating a peer reviewer. Again, Phoebe is encouraging, cheering and directing, according to her sense of what each student needed.

Phoebe is undeniably the one "directing the show"—an acknowledgment Phoebe was quick to offer to me. In the classroom Phoebe takes on the role of directing students as to what to do when, prodding students to perform to their best potential, while also stating emphatically that ultimately the responsibility to do well in the class is up to the individual student. So while she tells students that she is going to be their "nightmare" and their "second mother"—always checking up on them, at the same time there are limits to how much responsibility she will take on for them: "I think ultimately they are making the

decision about how much they want to get out of my class, you know? ....whatever they want to get out of my class, they could get out of my class. And part of that responsibility resides with them." (PJ 2: 194-20). Phoebe is by no means passive; she is right in the thick of the action, directing and offering her opinion.

Phoebe offered advise frequently. During the drafting process, Phoebe makes an effort to check in with each student to see what direction they are going with their essays. During these checks, performed often from a standing position as she read over a student's shoulder, Phoebe reads quickly, addressing only the major issues. Her response to Karen's first draft of essay one is typical: "That's great! You gotta decide. You can't write about everything. Have you decided what you really want to talk about?...It's going to be a really long essay... I need to see how it's all going to fit together, but keep writing. Good." This feedback is typical in that it is enthusiastic, but also frank and directive. As she checks in on students during the drafting process, one of her major aims is to ascertain whether or not students are on track. If she suspects that a student is off-track—e.g., working with a topic that is too difficult, too broad in aims (unfocused), writing without a point—Phoebe is quick to offer this opinion.

Although Phoebe is undeniably the one "directing the show," she does not do work they can do—like giving written feedback on an early draft—, but instead constantly sets up and prods students into action. She facilitates students' working together as well as working independently. In short, Phoebe makes things happen: from pushing her students collectively—"you guys have got to get your work done!"—to working with Ko to get started on his essay by asking him questions, helping with the brainstorming and finally just directing him: "I want you to write about what you've told me right now." (OB 7).

Phoebe's written comments on student essays are short--four to five sentences--and much less directive or invoved. By keeping her students brief Phoebe works to retain the primary importance of peers' responses to student writing. Whenever appropriate, she further underscores the value of peers' responses by making direct reference to them, as she did in her comment to Heather: "Please note your peer editor saw you developing two points which should have been your tip off that you needed more of a focus." Phoebe's commenting style illustrates the ways in which she, despite her active role in the class, strives to be replaceable.

Phoebe's approach to group discussion, peer review and responding to students' essays points to the larger issue of her role in the classroom and around whom—teacher or students—the classroom is centered. Despite Phoebe's constant presence, Phoebe is

minimally involved in the particulars of students' thinking and writing. In fact, by emphasizing peer review over her own review of their writing, Phoebe distances herself from many of the central decisions students make about their writing. In this way, Phoebe's class is thoroughly student-centered. The irony of Phoebe's class is that while Phoebe practically never stops moving and talking, she is very minimally involved with students' decisions about what they are going to write.

Marcia

Unlike Sabine, Marcia does not sit down at a terminal; and, unlike Phoebe, she does not typically pull the group into a circle. Rather, Marcia positions herself between the white board and the computer workstations, standing and visible to her students from their seats at the computers. From her traditional position at the center of the front of the room, facing her sitting students. On many days Marcia would give a short lecture—a summary of a previous day's discussion—or lead a discussion in which she took on the central role.

Marcia's instructions were always thorough, and she seemed not to mind repeating explanations or instructions. In her written and oral comments, Marcia tended to be quite explicit. For example, when it came time to work on the second draft of the first essay, Marcia's explained to students, at some length, that they re-read their first draft before writing; while for anyone who has written a paper in more than one draft re-reading is obvious, Marcia did not assume that her students had that experience. Marcia pointed out to me that Binh Pham, a very conscientious student, was confused by the very terminology that she had used in the syllabus, and so was unclear what was to be done on her own and what was work to be done in class. She used this example as evidence for why she felt that she had to be most explicit and assume very little: perhaps they "genuinely aren't …able to interpret my instructions here because I've chosen my own peculiar terminology, and [so it's important] then to be able to say, here's one last chance, let's talk about this. Perhaps you're not following this and I want to make it clear. I think that's respectful and not babying." (MC 2: 460-464)

Marcia's believed that she has a useful and important function as an instructor—as someone who knew how to, in her words, "walk the walk and talk the talk" of academic discourse. To this end, Marcia provided students with a variety of different writing tips and techniques, believing that there was no reason to expect them to reinvent the wheel on their own. As she explained, "I confess: I teach, at least as much, and every bit as much, as I am able.… I don't think I've become the old school, authoritarian marm whom Peter Elbow, Don Murray, or others were reacting against when they popularized the new

process model, any more than I think these men generally intended us teachers to stop teaching altogether." (MC UNH 1-2).

In her explicit instructor role, Marcia taught grammar and structure to her students, both through large group discussions, and through lengthy and detailed written comments on student papers. To her class she explained that learning the grammar and structure of standard academic writing was valued by professors and professionals, and she wanted to teach them what they would need to make it in the middle-class world. To me she explained, "on the one hand I don't want to restrict them to everything that the Writing Program is trying not to restrict them to, which is all those things that people make fun of, the five paragraph essays, ... the compromise I'm trying to get at this year is, 'Say what you want to say, but you've got to say it in a way that others can hear.'" (MC 2: 518-534). Marcia explained to students why she was teaching grammar—so that they could have access to the "culture of power" which Lisa Delpit described in her essay that they also read, "The Silenced Dialogue." Marcia explained that she felt she owed it to her students to be honest with them about how standard academic writing was valued in middle-class culture: "I decided this year that I'm not keeping any secrets... for years I've struggled with how much do I tell them.... How much do I give them my rationale. And then I thought, they deserve to know why I'm doing it. They can handle why. That's the only honest way to do it. Otherwise I'm just being manipulative." (MC 2: 205-212).

When I asked Marcia's student Lauren what she thinks Marcia's goals are for the course Lauren answered:

> ...well she wants us to be able to have our own style and our own personality and our own culture, but then she wants us to be able to succeed and she realizes that we need to know this, we need to know how to speak proper English, you know standard English, and, you know, how to act right, that kind of thing. 'Cause I mean it is true, and I think everyone knows that.

In Marcia's class, although there is a reader and a set curriculum complete with essay topics and guiding questions, in practice, students have close to complete control over what they write about. Their topics are their own, as are their opinions about the issues they raise. What amazed me most about Marcia's teaching was that she seemed never to get angry or irritated with her students, even privatelyto me, and even when I as

the observer felt irritation. It's not that Marcia was out of touch with her anger—she's not—but rather that she had trained herself—through the study of self-psychology as well as discipline, to adopt an empathic position with her students. She, in her words, "Stepped into their shoes, trying to figure out their actions from their perspective and not from my position." I observed the empathic stuance in class discussions, with individual students conversations, and most documentably, in her comments to students about their essays. Marcia's comments are often very long—a couple of typed pages—and while the explicit instructions on structure that I mentioned earlier partially account for their length, Marcia devoted much space to what amounted to a powerful piece of persuasive writing. Using examples, logical appeals, and personal testimonial, Marcia made the argument that the student, and the student's message was understandable, smart, and most importantly, worth saying. "What these students really need most," Marcia explained, "is someone who'se listening who wants them to succeed, who isn't there to knock them down, but to believe them. I think that's respectful, and not babying."

In Marcia's daily one-to-one conversations with students, as well as her written responses to students' essays , she puts herself firmly behind the student's ideas, beliefs, and perspective; she casts herself in the role of a supporter of their ideas. Yet, as Lauren explained, Marcia will intervene with how they write their essays through mini-grammar lessons, modeling paragraphing, and even offering students samples of how the sentence they have written could be re-written for academic readers.

Through this discussion of my perception of Marcia's teaching, I hope I have sketched a teacher whose pedagogy encompasses two different roles, each of which, viewed in isolation, might suggest a very different theoretical orientation. First, I have described the many ways in which Marcia is in explicit instructor, a teacher who as she said, teaches "every bit as much as I am able." (MC UNH 1). In some respects this teacher may evoke images from the old school, a teacher who places some (if limited) value in the five paragraph essay and traditional instruction in the mechanics of standard academic writing. In this role as a director and teacher, Marcia very clearly inhabits the center of the classroom, presenting herself as an authority on standard academic writing. I also have focused on the ways in which Marcia's pedagogy falls more in line with the thrust of what process writing scholars as well as feminist education theorists have emphasized: the need for writing teachers to focus on supporting student ideas and intellects, as well as the students themselves. In this respect Marcia's pedagogy is thoroughly student-centered; her

use of empathy to determine her responses to students places students clearly in the center of her efforts.

Who is the center of these classes? The teachers or the students? If we just look at what *actions* these teachers take in their classrooms—mini-lecturing, cheering, explaining, directing, demonstrating, modeling—it would be hard to call Phoebe and Marcia teachers of "decentered" classes, while Sabine's enactment of a teacher-decentered classroom requires a lot more effort and activity than I had previously thought such an approach required. But, if we look at the goals these actions are aimed at—teaching students the rules of academic culture, how to get help from peers, how to express oneself so others' can understand you, in short, learning self-empowerment—I think we see three teachers, not one, whose classes are very much centered on students.